

GUEST EDITORIAL

Anthropology: A Personal View

Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney
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My entry into anthropology was quite personal. I came to the United States as a foreign student from Japan. After I began to understand English, I continued to make mistakes and did not always understand the way of life in the States. I became intrigued by the way a culture patterns individual behavior and thought processes. I have been hooked ever since, and I could not have chosen a more satisfying life and career.

Historically, one hallmark of anthropology has been the study of other cultures. It has been a quest for “the other”—a people whose way of life is quite distinct, culturally speaking, from that of the anthropologist. Anthropological studies have often turned out to be quests for the collective self, the culture of the anthropologist, through the “knowing” of the other. Initially, the conceptual distance provides a critical distance whereby the patterns of the host culture emerge clearly, although as one’s study progresses the closing of the distance must take place while the “reading” of the other gains its depth.

I too started as an anthropologist studying a culture distant from my own Japanese culture. The first sixteen years of my anthropological career were spent studying the Ainu a hunting-gathering people in northern Japan. My research focused on the symbolic dimensions of their culture—their cosmology—through the study of not only rituals but daily life as well. I examined how the Ainu classify their world—their time, space, and the beings of their universe, including humans, plants, and nonhuman animals. As my work progressed, however, I began to be intrigued by the opposite of classification—ambiguity, anomaly, and chaos—and how Ainu culture, as well as many other cultures, gives symbolic prominence to these concepts. These concepts are prominent in the Ainu understanding of illness and in their shamanistic healing ritual. I published an account of how the Ainu give order to their universe and deal with departures from order, in my *Illness and Healing among the Sakhalin Ainu* in 1981.

During the years when I was absorbed in Ainu culture, I paid little attention to my own Japanese culture. In 1979, however, I turned to Japanese culture. I had by then become acutely aware that anthropology must turn its attention to large-scale industrial societies as well. I could no longer encourage students to look for the small-scale societies that anthropologists traditionally studied. We must see how anthropological methods and theories may be applied in the study of modern nation-states. We must study societies with long historical traditions in order to understand how culture changes over time.

Contemporary Japanese culture is an ideal “field site” for exploring various theoretical concerns in contemporary anthropology. I extended my theoretical interest in order and chaos to Japanese culture and studied the understanding of health and illness held by contemporary Japanese and

their health-care system. Although the domain of illness and health care in a society like Japan, where science has a long tradition, is expected to have been taken over by science, my findings suggest that the symbolic notions of purity and impurity and the basically dualist cosmology of the Japanese constitute the underlying principles behind their approach to illness and health care (*Illness and Culture in Contemporary Japan*, 1984). Thus, I was able to probe into a pressing question of our time: Do science and industrialization bring about a more-or-less homogeneous culture the world over?

With a long history of written records, Japanese culture also enables me to examine a culture through time. The study of historical transformations of a culture, or more precisely symbolic forms, meanings, and structures, has become a central concern in contemporary anthropology now that we are acutely aware that a purely synchronic (without reference to history) approach to culture has severe limitations.

My current work focuses on historical transformations of the meaning of the monkey metaphor. The monkey has been a dominant metaphor of self in that the Japanese throughout history have seen themselves in their portrayal of the monkey as if it were a mirror. However, how they saw the monkey varies from one historical period to another: its meaning has been transformed from that of a sacred mediator in early history, to a scapegoat during the Early Modern period, to a clown in contemporary Japan. Study of the monkey metaphor tells us a great deal about the conception of self in Japanese culture.

Some say that anthropology is in a crisis, but I believe that it is in a most exciting period. Recent political and epistemological questions have rocked the foundations of our discipline. Anthropology is no longer an exclusive territory for Western (admittedly a questionable blanket term) scholars. Orientalism has made us realize the partial, and often very skewed, representations of the other in Western scholarship. Native anthropologists and women are bringing in new insights to our disciplines, and, hopefully, we will see more Tocquevilles.

There have been exciting developments in theories as well. In symbolic anthropology we have been accustomed to the scientific paradigm, which emphasizes order and classification and the cognitive dimension of human behavior. But recently our study has been heavily influenced by the humanistic disciplines, which emphasize, for example, synthesizing elements in culture and the emotive dimensions

of human behavior. These factors have made us reexamine the nature of fieldwork and of writing ethnography. The emphasis on practice compels us to scrutinize the interrelationship between structure and process, and between culture and individual, and a host of other dialectics we have been concerned about are receiving a new and invigorated thrust.

In addition, we are now paying serious attention to history, and this should help us understand the dynamics of culture that a synchronic study alone would not unveil. We are also meeting the challenge of extending anthropological methods and theories to nation-states. The anthropology of contemporary cultures will supply us with exciting findings and theoretical challenges. Anthropologists will be offering new insights into the workings of nation-states, and their work

will gradually transform the stereotypical image of anthropology as a discipline in search only of small groups of faraway peoples.